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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BOGOTA 003913

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [ELAB](#) [SOCI](#) [CO](#)
SUBJECT: FOUR CASE STUDIES OF LABOR VIOLENCE IN COLOMBIA

REF: A. BOGOTA 3866

[B](#). BOGOTA 3345
[C](#). 03 BOGOTA 5768
[D](#). 01 BOGOTA 11005

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#). (C) During a meeting with four participants in a USDOL-funded exchange program for at-risk trade unionists, we learned that paramilitaries had targeted at least three of them because of their leftist political activism, rather than their trade union membership. Carlos Rodriguez, the moderate president of the United Workers Central (CUT), Colombia's largest and traditionally most left-of-center labor federation, recently confided to the Embassy that the radical attitudes and activities of some CUT members had stained the CUT as a whole and converted all of its members into potential targets of paramilitary violence. Further study of this issue is needed to discern whether or not these case studies correlate to a larger trend. However, these case studies do highlight the importance of considering cases of labor violence in context, rather than assuming that paramilitaries target trade unionists solely because of their labor activism. End Summary.

Context

[2](#). (SBU/NF) On April 2, four participants in the AFL-CIO Solidary Center's USDOL-funded exchange program for at-risk trade unionists visited the Embassy before their departure to share their first-hand experiences with violence against trade unions. In 2003, the exchange program provided U.S.-based training and technical education to nearly 40 Colombian trade union leaders under threat. The four trade unionists we met, who are all currently enrolled in the GOC Ministry of Interior and Justice's (MOI/J) protection program (ref B), were: Miguel Fernandez, United Workers Central (CUT) regional president for Cauca department; Luis Molina, CUT regional president for Boyaca department; Maria Eugenia Paez, secretary general of the executive board of SINTRENAL, a CUT-affiliated teachers union; and Nelson Quijano, regional human rights director for the "Union Sindical Obrera" (USO), a national oil workers union affiliated with the CUT.

Some Targeted Because of Political Positions

[3](#). (C) Moderates within the CUT, led by CUT National President Carlos Rodriguez, generally eschew strictly political debates and instead emphasize bread-and-butter issues such as collective bargaining, the right to strike, and the importance of strengthening labor inspection mechanisms. CUT leftists, however, support a confrontational, ideological approach to their activism that includes opposition to even centrist government policies only tangentially related to labor rights (ref A). Fernandez, CUT regional president in highly conflictive Cauca department, told us local paramilitaries threatened him because he organized opposition to the October 2003 political and economic reform referendum, publicly criticized GOC social policy, advocated greater GOC social investment, and marshalled support for left-wing political candidates. Fernandez, who recognized he was threatened because of his political activities, stated that such activity is part-and-parcel of labor activism.

[4](#). (C) Paez, a high school teacher in Cucuta, Norte de Santander department, said paramilitaries targeted her for advocating leftist politics in the classroom. Paez told us that although she never discussed politics with students, her leftist leanings are well-known and consistent with labor

activism. Paez's statements indicate she was targeted because of her politics, rather than for membership in a trade union or for labor rights advocacy. GOC Ministry of Defense (MOD) statistics indicate that murders of teachers dropped 48 percent in 2003. Unionized and non-unionized educators are still, however, threatened, attacked, and/or forcibly displaced by both paramilitaries and leftist guerrillas for allegedly disseminating propaganda in the classroom (ref C).

Others Targeted for Opposing Paramilitaries

15. (C) Molina, CUT regional president for Boyaca department, told us his name appeared on a list of paramilitary "military objectives" because he organized resistance among small merchants to paramilitary extortion attempts. Molina insisted that paramilitaries targeted him because of his union leadership, but also speculated that paramilitaries' animosity toward him was probably motivated by his leftist ideology, his efforts to organize resistance to their depredations, and his opposition to their alleged use of emerald mines as drug labs.

Perceived Guerrilla Ties Lead to Violence

16. (C) Of the four, only USO activist Quijano appears to have been targeted strictly for his trade union affiliation. However, he also told us that USO recently organized activities in support of a group of peasants from Bolivar department who have been charged with rebellion by the Prosecutor General's Office ("Fiscalia").

17. (C/NF) CUT National President Carlos Rodriguez has confided to Embassy officers that some of his greatest challenges have been to help CUT members differentiate bread-and-butter labor activism from tangential political issues and to convince hard-core CUT leftists to abandon tacit -- and even active -- support for guerrilla organizations. Rodriguez explained in frustration that the actions of some misguided CUT members had stained them all as radical leftists and given paramilitaries an excuse to target the CUT as a whole.

Comment

18. (C/NF) While these case studies do not constitute a representative sample, they do highlight the importance of considering contextual information in any analysis of violence against trade unionists in Colombia. The fact that 97 percent of threatened Colombian trade unionists belong to the CUT (ref A) indicates that violence against trade unionists may be selective and that members of other Colombian trade unions are largely not targeted by paramilitaries. The propensity of some within the CUT to correlate labor activism with political radicalism may help to explain why the CUT is disproportionately targeted by paramilitaries and why the CUT is widely distrusted by private sector employers.

WOOD